Aesop through the Ages

An Examination of Aesop's Fables in the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection

Teresa S. Welsh
Associate Professor
School of Library and Information Science
University of Southern Mississippi

INTRODUCTION

Many libraries contain hidden treasures, particularly academic libraries, which collect and archive historic materials for scholarly research. This paper focuses on one of the richest collections at The University of Southern Mississippi, the de Grummond Collection, examines the background and historical context of the oldest items in the collection, *Aesop's Fables*, and notes strategies that address visibility and accessibility of rare items.

DE GRUMMOND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE COLLECTION

The de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, founded in 1966 by Dr. Lena Y. de Grummond, is one of North America's leading collections of children's books and primary-source materials related to children's literature. The collection includes original manuscripts and illustrations of more than 1300 authors and illustrators as well as more than 160,000 books dating from 1530 to the present. The collection is a rich repository of research materials for scholars interested in children's literature, history of the book, history of art and illustration, or history of education. Additional information is available online: http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/degrum/ .

BACKGROUND: WHO WAS AESOP?

The fables of Aesop, thought to be a Greek slave who lived in Greece about 600 BC, have had an enduring influence on children's literature. More than 600 animal fables have been attributed to Aesop and many versions have been published as faithful retellings of the ancient morality tales or as more modern adaptations.

Greek historian Herodotus claimed that Aesop (c. 620-560 BC) was a slave first owned by Xanthus on Isle of Samos and later by Iadmon who gave him freedom because he was such a skilled storyteller (Herodotus, Waterfield & Dewald, 1998).

Aesop reportedly traveled to Asia Minor and, through his wit and intelligence, became an advisor to King Croesus who sent him on a diplomatic tour of the Greece. At Corinth, it was reported that he recited "The Frogs Who Desired a King" with the moral, "Better no rule than cruel rule" (http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/aesops-fables-the-frogs-desiring-a-king/). Herodotus reported that the people of Delphi took offense with his fables and threw Aesop from a cliff (Herodotus, Waterfield & Dewald, 1998).

Evidence of African Origin

There is some evidence that Aesop was of African origin. His Greek name *Aisopos* is a version of *Aethiop* or Ethiopian, which means "burnt-faced people" and many of the animals in fables attributed to Aesop were not Greek but African: apes, lions, elephants, crocodiles, jackals, monkeys, asps, scorpions (Lobban, 2002).

Lobban (2002) cites a consistency of animal characters and names between Nubian and Aesopian moral fables, indicating a common origin and Ethiopian/Nubian ancestry. The tradition of anthropomorphism (stories of animals with human characteristics) is an ancient one that dates back to the beginnings of civilization.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ANIMAL FABLES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The word "fable" comes from Latin *fabula* meaning story or tale, usually, a short tale that teaches a moral lesson, often using animals (dictionary.com). The representation of animals with human characteristics and speech dates back to ancient Sumer and Egypt, and some scholars have found similarities from this tradition to later fables attributed to Aesop.

Sumerian

Scholars have been able to trace two of Aesop's fables back to a much older collection of Sumerian proverbs dating to before the 7th century BC (Dalley, 1991). The Aesopian fable "The Gnat and the Bull" (http://read.gov/aesop/008.html) is similar to the older Sumerian proverb "The Gnat and the Elephant" and "The Eagle and the Fox" is similar to the older Sumerian "The Eagle and the Serpent" (Gordon, 1958).

Egyptian

Ancient Egyptians seemed to take delight in portraying animals in a reversal of the natural order or *maat*, such as cats serving/pampering a mouse (Wilson, 2007, http://www.ancientegyptmagazine.co.uk/permesut44.htm).

An Egyptian papyrus dated to the Late New Kingdom (Figure 1) illustrates this theme and depicts a lion playing a game with an antelope, fox herding deer, and cats herding geese (British Museum, 2014).

This theme is echoed in many of Aesop's tales that focus on the weak overcoming or rescuing the strong such as "The

Figure 1: Painted Egyptian papyrus (c. 1100 BC). © British Museum, London (used with permission).

Lion and the Mouse" in which a Lion spares the life of a Mouse who later repays the kindness by chewing through a net in which the Lion was caught (http://read.gov/aesop/007.html).

Animal Stereotypes

According to Flavius Philostratus (c. 200 AD), the philosopher Apollonius said of Aesop: "He puts animals in a pleasing light and makes them interesting to mankind. For after being brought up from childhood with these stories … we acquire certain opinions of the several animals and think of some of them as royal animals, of others as silly, of others as witty, and others as innocent" (Philostratus & Conybeare, 1989).

Some common animal stereotypes in Aesop's Fables are reflected as well in other traditional literatures, such as Biblical literature:

- Cruel, ravenous wolf; "a wolf from the desert will ravage them" (Jeremiah 5:6).
- Evil snake: "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field" (Geneses 3:1).
- Ferocious, proud lion; "a lion, mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing" (Proverbs 30:30).
- Meek lamb; "he was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7).
- Soaring eagle; "An eagle will soar and swoop down" (Jeremiah 49:22).
- Sly fox; "the little foxes, that spoil the vines" (Song of Solomon 2:15).
- Lazy grasshopper; "the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred" (Ecclesiastes 12:5).
- Industrious ant; "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise" (Proverbs 6: 6–8).

USE OF FABLES FOR INSTRUCTION

"Ask the animals and they will teach you" (Job 12:7). The philosopher Apollonius said of Aesop "like those who dine well off the plainest dishes, he made use of humble incidents to teach great truths" (Philostratus & Conybeare, 1989).

In the preface to his 1658 collection of classical fables entitled T*he Wisdome of the Ancients*, Francis Bacon argued that "beneath no small number of the fables of the ancient poets there lay from the very beginning a mystery and an allegory." Through such fables, hidden meanings can be exposed and made understood to unskilled ears and eyes and "the fable serves as a very appropriate expedient for instruction and persuasion, the higher goals of rhetoric beyond simple entertainment and delight" (pp. 695-699).

Aesop was taught in schools in classical Greece and was considered to be basic knowledge as referenced by characters in two comedies by Aristophanes:

"You are not educated. You never inquire. Of your Aesop you don't know a word" (*The Birds* by Aristophanes, 414 BC).

"Others tell us anecdotes or some comic story from Aesop" (*The Wasps* by Aristophanes, 422 BC).

Plato (360 BC) wrote that Socrates, while in jail at the end of his life, spent his time turning Aesop's fables "which he knew" into verses (Plato & Gallop, 1975).

AESOP IN THE DE GRUMMOND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE COLLECTION

The large number and variety of Aesop's Fables in the de Gummond collection is an indication of their usefulness for moral instruction as well as entertainment since ancient times. The dates of the more than 200 Aesop's Fables in de Grummond range from the 16th to the 21st centuries. The oldest and rarest item in the collection is dated 1530 (Figure 2), *Aesopi Phrygis Fabellae Græce & Latine* (*Aesop's Fables in Greek and Latin*).

The de Grummond collection contains another rare edition from 1698, *Fabularum Aesopicarum Delectus* (*Selected Fables of Aesop*) in Greek and Latin with additional fables in Hebrew/Latin and Arabic/Latin.

Editions from the 1700's include the first English version, *Fables of Aesop* by Roger L'Estrange (1708); *The Eagle and the Robin: An Apologue* by H.G.L. Mag (1709); *Aesop's Fables in English and Latin* by John Locke (1723); *Aesop Unveiled or The Beauties of Deformity*, printed and sold by J. Clarke, London (1731); *Fables Translated from Aesop and Other Authors* by Charles Draper (1774); Fables of Aesop and Others by Samuel Croxall (1782); and *A History of the Life of Aesop* by Roger L'Estrange (1798).

DE GRUMMOND COLLECTION: VISIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

While serious scholars of children's literature, nationally and internationally are aware of this collection (it is listed by the British Library at http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpsubject/literature/chillit/childlinks/childlinks.html), many local scholars, librarians, and teachers are unfamiliar with the collection and its available resources. To promote the collection, de Grummond engages in several community outreach strategies to increase the collection's visibility and accessibility.

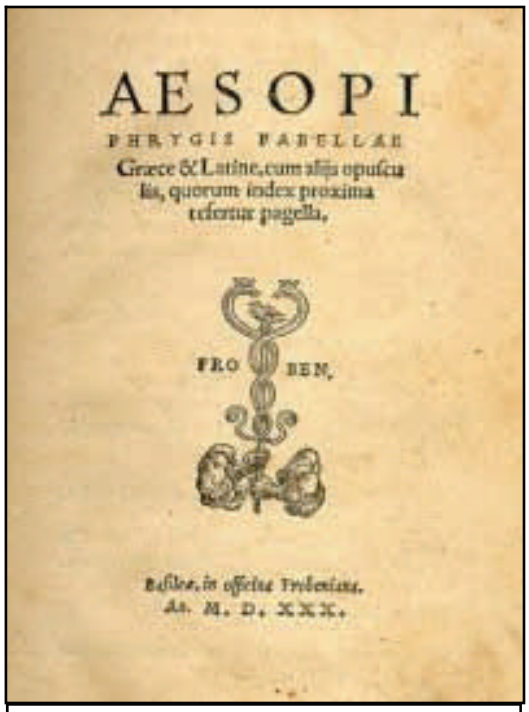
AESOPI
PHRYGIS FABELLAE
Græce & Latine, cum aliis opusculis, quorum index proxima reperitur pagella.
FRO BEN.
Basileæ, in officina Frobeniana.
An. M. D. XXX.

Figure 2: *Aesop's Fables in Greek and Latin* (1530). Title page courtesy of the de Grummond Collection Curator Ellen Ruffin (http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/degrum/public_html/images/aesop1.jpg)

Digitization

To increase accessibility, de Grummond has digitized some of their rarest and most valuable books, including three historic versions of *Aesop's Fables*. These may be viewed full-text online in University of Southern Mississippi Libraries Digital Collections:

Aesop Unveiled or The Beauties of Deformity (1731):
http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/dgbooks/id/2201/rec/1

Aesop's Fables (c. 1880):
http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/dgbooks/id/637/rec/2

Baby's Own Aesop: The Fables Condensed in Rhyme by Walter Crane (1887): http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/dgbooks/id/3399/rec/3

Exhibit Room

The de Grummond Children's Literature Collection Exhibit Room, located on the second floor of Southern Miss Cook Library in Hattiesburg, displays selected materials from the collection including artwork and early children's books (Figure 3). The exhibit is open to the public.

Children's Book Festival

Each April, the de Grummond Collection is a co-sponsor, with the Southern Miss School of Library and Information Science, of the Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival. This year, the festival will be held April 9-11 at the USM Thad Cochran Center in Hattiesburg (https://www.usm.edu/childrens-book-festival). During the festival, the de Grummond Collection partners with the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation to present the Ezra Jack Keats New Author and New Illustrator Book Awards (http://www.ezra-jack-keats.org/2014-book-award-press/).

Social Media: YouTube

Southern Miss MLIS student Cole Smith coordinated the production of a series of short videos by the USM Learning Enhancement Center (LEC) featuring de Grummond Curator Ellen Ruffin talking about selected items from the collection. These videos were created for online courses related to archives and the history of children's literature but are available for anyone to use:

de Grummond Children's Literature Collection (youtube.com/watch?v=CKuqEEJ6dgk)
An overview of how the de Grummond collection was started and some of their prized holdings.

H.A. & Margaret Ray (youtube.com/watch?v=etVEiuxKOCM)
An overview of the life and works of H.A. & Margaret Rey, the creators of the stories of Curious George. The materials discussed are on display at the de Grummond exhibit room at USM Cook Library.

Figure 3: de Grummond Exhibit Room (photo by T.S. Welsh, 2013).

Kate Greenaway (youtube.com/watch?v=gZNS18egVk0)
A video about one of the first famous children's literature authors, Kate Greenaway. The video reveals how colored children's books were made using wood blocks that had the pictures and text etched out in them.

Ezra Jack Keats (youtube.com/watch?v=KoJFjWwyQd0)
An overview of the life of famed children's novelist Ezra Jack Keats and a look at the process of how some of his art was made. The material discussed is displayed at the de Grummond exhibit room in USM Cook Library.

Social Media: Facebook

The de Grummond Collection maintains a Facebook page where they post images and updates about the collection: facebook.com/pages/de-Grummond-Childrens-Literature-Collection/103104874119 .

CONCLUSION

For specific questions about Aesop's Fables or any other item in the collection, complete the reference form at: lib.usm.edu/legacy/degrum/public_html/html/research/ref.shtml .

To schedule an appointment to view items from the de Grummond Collection contact Curator Ellen Ruffin, Assistant Curator Danielle Bishop, or Collection Specialist Amanda Myers at (601) 266-4349.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES RELATED TO AESOP'S FABLES

The Aesop for Children
http://read.gov/aesop/001.html

Aesopica: Aesop's Fables in English, Latin, & Greek
http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/

Best-Loved Aesop Fables
http://mmdelrosario.hubpages.com/hub/Best-Loved-Aesop-Fables

The Evolution of Aesop's Fables
http://ryerson.ca/childrenslit/group40.html

The Fables of Aesop as First Printed by William Caxton in 1484
http://archive.org/stream/fablesofaesopasf02aesouoft#page/n11/mode/2up

Aesop's Fables Interactive Book, app for smart phone or tablet
http://read.gov/aesop/index.htm

Free Audio of Aesop's Fables
http://storynory.com/category/aesop

Online Collection of Aesop's Fables with Moral of the Story http://www.aesopfables.com/aesopsel.html

Wise Animals: Aesop and His Followers
http://www.library.illinois.edu/rbx/exhibitions/Aesop/aesopica.html

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper is based in part on a presentation at the 2013 Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival.